

A guide to – Syphilis

Syphilis – the basics

Syphilis is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium (a kind of germ) called *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis can infect almost any part of the body. The most common signs are ulcers on the genitals or in the mouth, skin rashes and swollen lymph glands. Sometimes syphilis produces no symptoms and the infection is only discovered when a blood test is performed. If left untreated it can cause serious health problems.

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics.

Most testing is done at specialised sexual health or genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics. However, family doctors (general practitioners or ‘GP’s) and hospital doctors can also test their patients for syphilis. All pregnant women are offered syphilis testing as a normal part of antenatal care.

If you have syphilis we recommend that you should have routine tests for other STI including HIV.

How common is syphilis?

Syphilis is not common in the UK. In 2014, about 4,300 cases of syphilis were diagnosed in England. In contrast, over 206,000 cases of chlamydia infection were diagnosed in the same year. Most cases of syphilis occurred in men who have sex with men.

How do you catch syphilis?

Syphilis is passed on:

- through unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone who has syphilis
- by touching ulcers or weeping rashes in someone who has syphilis
- through blood transfusions, although this is very rare in the UK
- from an infected mother to her unborn baby

Syphilis cannot be caught by hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

What would I notice if I had syphilis?

Some people do not notice anything wrong and the infection is discovered only when they have a blood test. Some develop one or more of the following:

- Ulcers on the genitals, near the anus (back passage) or in the mouth
- A skin rash
- Swollen lymph glands, for example in the groin or neck

Symptoms may occur as early as a week after infection, but sometimes it takes many months before the person notices a problem.

How do I get tested for syphilis?

The most important test for syphilis is carried out on a sample of blood. Some GUM clinics can perform microscope or other laboratory tests on a sample taken from a skin ulcer if one is present.

You will be told about how you will get your final test results before you leave the clinic.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is curable and easy to treat with the antibiotic penicillin, usually by injection into the muscle of your buttock. The number of injections depends on how long you have been infected. If you are allergic to penicillin, you will be given a different antibiotic.

All treatments from sexual health clinics are free and are given to you in the clinic.

Important information about your treatment

The antibiotics are highly effective. Some people develop a high temperature and feel unwell (e.g with a headache and aching muscles) within 12 hours of treatment. This is called the Jarisch Herxheimer reaction (JHR). The JHR only lasts for a few hours and gets better on its own. Some people will find it helpful to take paracetamol if they develop the reaction.

What about my partner?

As syphilis is an STI, it is important that your sexual partner is tested for syphilis and other STIs. If you have had other sexual partners in the past, some of these may also need testing. The doctor will advise you about this.

If you wish and with your permission, the clinic can contact your partner for you without mentioning your name. This is known as partner notification.

When can I have sex again?

You must not have sex again until you and your partner have been treated. The doctor will advise you when it is safe.

What happens if syphilis is not treated?

If syphilis is not treated there is a risk of damage to the nervous system (the brain, spinal cord and nerves) as well as the heart. These complications may take many years to develop and happen very rarely in this country because the treatment works so well.

How will I know if I have been cured of syphilis?

This is shown by blood tests which are taken after you have finished your treatment. The doctor will explain this to you.

Can syphilis be caught again?

Yes. Having syphilis once gives no protection in future. To prevent this make sure that your partner has been treated before having sex with them again.

Protect yourself with new partners by using a condom for all anal, oral and vaginal sex. Ensure that both you and a new partner have a sexual health screen before any unprotected sex (sex without a condom).

Syphilis in pregnancy

This is discussed in a separate leaflet: 'A guide for pregnant women who have a positive syphilis blood test.' This can be accessed on the website of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).

This leaflet was produced by the Clinical Effectiveness Group of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH). Contents are based on information in the UK National Guideline on the Management of Syphilis 2015

More information:

BASHH: www.bashh.org/guidelines

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